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Leadership Thoughts from

Under the Magnolia Tree

A periodic newsletter from the desk of Kent Hutchison of C.J. Baxter Group, LLC.

**SPECIAL CHAMBER
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What Chamber Executives Need to Excel



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Howdy folks. Life is short, enjoy your coffee. Today's topic is about the chamber of commerce executive.

Too often chamber executives, as well as leaders of many organizations, get comfortable with their position and their effectiveness begins to suffer. The following represents a few observations from working with chamber executives:

1. **The chamber executive gets out of touch.** As the chamber leader spends more time in the office, they can get disconnected from business owners and chamber members in the community. Meanwhile, evolving community and business needs, technological innovation, and other environmental changes put the chamber executive at risk of becoming obsolete. For example, today many chamber executives are slow to adapt to the changes that digital and social channels are bringing to the chamber industry as well as to respective members' businesses.

POTENTIAL SOLUTION: *Get out of your office and meet with chamber members in the community. Learn about their businesses and how the chamber may help them grow. Stay in touch with your members – directly.*

2. **The chamber executive develops blind spots.** Even the most effective leaders have flaws. Unfortunately, self-awareness of these flaws is often limited. Over time, a leader's blind spots can weaken the chamber of commerce. For example, a chamber executive's strong managerial skills helped her address critical operational weaknesses to get the "membership sales machine" back on track. But once the immediate problems were solved, the leader's continued focus on short-term tactics ahead of long-term strategies caused the membership sales force to drift.

POTENTIAL SOLUTION: *Get feedback from both your employees and from a mentor frequently. Look for potential blind spots. Become aware that although you must address short-term needs; you have a responsibility to think long-term and create a legacy for the chamber and the business community.*

3. **Volunteers and employees cower as the chamber executive personal power grows.** A chamber executive's power comes not only from their knowledge and expertise but also from the position itself. The chamber executive controls the career progression and compensation of other chamber employees – and influences the progression of chamber volunteers as they navigate the organization's committee and board structure. Volunteers and chamber employees may start to curry favor, shower the executive with praise, or fear speaking up with ideas counter to the executive's views. The situation gets worse if the executive abuses power by intimidating subordinates.

POTENTIAL SOLUTION: *Be aware that your position alone may influence the behavior of others. Be humble and ask for input and feedback frequently. Transparency in all decisions is crucial.*

4. **The chamber executive locks in on favorite employee team members or chamber volunteers.** As the executive's bonds with volunteers and chamber employees get stronger, personal relationships that were once a source of strength may cloud the executive's perceptions and impede good choices. This creates complications



when it is time to make difficult personnel or volunteer committee decisions about performance, promotions, or job assignments.

POTENTIAL SOLUTION: *Continue building relationships across the board. Look for opportunities to share the work responsibilities and develop your team and volunteers. Take risks in giving new responsibilities to keep your employees and volunteer engagement at a high level.*

The successful chamber executive should actively think about making the time they spend in their role *better*. Chamber boards need to establish strategies for helping chamber executives excel over time. Chamber executives, in turn, need to develop plans for assisting the chamber employees and volunteers. Solutions require improving chamber executive selection, development, and performance management while creating a culture that encourages leadership success.

Effective strategies include the following:

Selecting a chamber executive leader who is a lifelong learner. The best chamber executive candidates are self-motivated to search for new knowledge continually and to adapt to environmental change. Chamber board of directors can support the development of the chamber executive by providing unique experiences for leaders. Chambers can also provide the executive with opportunities to participate in education programs or attend conferences where they can share best practices with peers. Chamber culture also plays a role in encouraging leaders to seek constant improvement and adapt to change.

Using performance management to make chamber leaders aware of their blind spots. Although financial results (such as membership sales and profits) are a crucial metric for evaluating chamber executive performance, they also need feedback from the board of directors about *how* they contribute to results. Do they have the necessary capabilities? Are they engaging in the right activities? Coaching by superiors and mentors is critical for helping chamber executives avoid blind spots and strengthen their leadership skills. It is also essential to choose chamber executives who possess characteristics such as self-awareness and open-mindedness.

Creating a culture that discourages intimidation and favoritism. The culture of the chamber of commerce has a significant influence on the executive's behavior. A culture that promotes long-term chamber member success over short-term membership sales goal achievement discourages executives from pressuring subordinates inappropriately to make this quarter's numbers. A culture that encourages decision making based on data and frameworks, rather than on opinion and instinct, brings objectivity to the chamber executive's personnel decisions. Selecting a leader with the right personality characteristics helps reinforce the desired culture.

Well, these are just some of my thoughts about what folks need to excel over time. What are your thoughts? What are you doing to stay relevant and to shine in your community?

I would love to hear from you.

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